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ABSTRACT

Seven Oaks School, a high school in Winnipeg (Canada) recently conducted a followup study of its graduates using a unique approach. High school seniors helped develop the structured interview instrument and carried out the research. As it gathered important information to help the school district in its planning, the study provided students with the valuable experience of doing authentic research as part of their high school experience. The school district serves 9,200 students in Winnipeg, the capital city of Manitoba. Six students from each of the district's three high schools were selected to participate as part of requirements of a Language and Transactional English course. With student input, a consultant designed a series of questions to be used in telephone interviews. Students interviewed 410 former students, about 30% of the total population for the 2 years chosen for the study. Students were trained in analyzing the data and eventually prepared a presentation for their school. Audiences at the school conference, staff meetings, and the Board of Education were impressed by the information and presentation of these young researchers. The approach combines low-cost data collection with the improvement of district-wide communication and educational experience for students. (SLD)

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Developing Student Voice: A Follow-up Study with Students as Researchers

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INTRODUCTION

Follow-up studies of high school graduates have been conducted by many school districts in the past two decades. Seven Oaks School Division in Winnipeg, Canada, recently conducted such a study with a unique approach: students helped to develop the structured interview instrument and carried out the research. While gathering important evidence to assist the district in improving high school education, the study provided students with the valuable experience of doing authentic research as part of their high school studies. Although the data held some surprises for the district, the involvement of students and their teachers from all three district high schools became the most distinctive feature of this research effort.

Seven Oaks School Division serves some 9,200 students in the north end of Winnipeg, the provincial capital of Manitoba. It is a district with a strong commitment to study, reflection and dialogue among its professional staff and to giving students opportunity to develop their individual and collective voices in the pursuit of their education. The district, in considering a major restructuring of its high schools, particularly struggled with questions regarding the optimum size of a high school, effective programming, and the preparation for the post-secondary intentions of its students. It was determined that a follow-up study which would detail responses of a large number of recent graduates was needed. A telephone interview method was chosen rather than a mailed questionnaire and so the possibility of senior students gathering the data was raised.

The provincial English Language Arts curriculum offers grade twelve students a choice between courses which emphasize literary or transactional forms, the latter being understood as "language to get things done," or functional language. Both electives emphasize a major project. Therefore, a follow-up of recent graduates was an opportunity to involve interested students and their teachers of the Language and Transactional Forms elective course in the research study.

We were unable to find any follow-up studies where students had helped to design, carry out and interpret the research. Without the benefits of other models, our process evolved, with the help of a professional researcher, as we encountered each stage. In retrospect, we would make only minor alterations to what turned out to be an exciting, inexpensive and highly successful process for students, teachers, administrators, a university professor and a professional researcher.

CONDUCTING THE RESEARCH

Six students from each of the district's three high schools were selected by their teachers to participate in carrying out the research as part of the requirements to complete the Language and Transactional English course. The 18 students, their three teachers, a member of the Faculty of Education (University of Manitoba), a professional researcher from a private consulting company and the Assistant Superintendent of the district met to discuss the kinds of questions which would get at the general question: "How do you feel about your high school education, considering what you are doing now?" From this discussion, the private consultant designed a series of questions to be used in telephone interviews. The final version of this instrument was the result of revisions based on feedback from the student teams at a subsequent meeting.

The Assistant Superintendent sent letters asking all former students who were in Grade 11 during the 1990-91 and 1992-93 school years if they would agree to participate. Only about 50 former students responded to the request, so the student interviewers had to play a role in requesting participation when they made the initial telephone calls.

Before the telephone interviewing began, the professional researcher held another session with students to train them in interviewing skills. The session dealt not only with interviewing techniques, proper recording of responses, and documentation of the telephone call-backs, but also with ethical and safety issues.

Over a period of approximately one month the students conducted 410 telephone interviews out of a potential population of about 1300 former students. This sample represented approximately 30% of the total population in the two years chosen for study. Interviews varied in length from 15 minutes to one hour.

After the interviews were completed, students attended another training session. The researcher worked with students to show them how to code the open-ended responses from their interviews. This process involved students in making choices about how to categorize the open-ended responses in order to prepare the information for data entry and analysis by staff of the research company.

Data were analyzed by school, by gender, by whether former students had taken university entrance or general courses, by whether students had graduated, and by post-high school activity. At another session the researcher trained students in interpretation using only the district-wide data. This set the stage for students to work with their school's own data.

Back at their schools, the students worked in teams to interpret their school's data and prepared a presentation which they gave at a district high school conference. Subsequently, each student team gave its presentation at their school's staff meeting. Then students presented at a meeting of the Board of Trustees (which was also attended by administrators and parents) as well as in their own classrooms to their peers. Finally, students wrote research reports to complete their Transactional English course requirements.

EFFECT OF THE PROCESS ON STUDENTS, TEACHERS, SCHOOLS AND THE SCHOOL DISTRICT

After school closed for summer holidays and our students had completed all their graduation activities, several of them returned to be interviewed. We asked them to enumerate the skills they felt they had learned by being involved in the study. Those mentioned were:

- How to construct a survey instrument "to get the desired information";
- How to conduct effective phone interviews, with all the subtle communication skills needed to deal with a wide range of "subjects" (loquacious to taciturn, cooperative to hostile, the flirt and potential harasser, etc.). Navdeep spoke of the "little tricks" one learns to get people to talk, such as how long to wait while the interviewee reflects;
- How to code responses (preparing the data for input to the computer), much of which demands synthetic skills such as categorizing as well as analysis;
- How to read graphs, tables and interpret data;
- How to synthesize results and organize them for reporting;
- How to plan an effective presentation -- and, as it turned out, for four different audiences -- which included learning to use an overhead projector or a presentation device. Marvin observed that:

  > Computers are becoming a big part of society now. I didn't know how to really use one before. It was a lot easier to present without using the overhead. [One of our teachers] taught us how to use PowerPoint;

- How to interpret data and plan presentations as part of a team of eighteen or six. As Navdeep said, she learned how to deal with "six different points of view."

Such a list does not do full credit to the impact of this experience. The very nature of the task; the immediate and larger social context of the inquiry; the relevance and ultimate usefulness of the findings to the larger Seven Oaks community; the expanding effect of both the results and the inquiry on the ongoing dialogue among all the constituents of that community, particularly the way it has drawn in and given authority to the "student's voice;" the effect of students' views of school and schoolwork . . . all contributed to a richness not often found within the school curriculum.

Understanding Their Own Learning

Working for an entire semester as a team with a clear sense of responsibility and purpose led students to think in new ways about their relationship to their own learning. "What better way to *know* than having to *present* -- and over and over again to different groups?" said Peter. Corinne talked about how "since then in my volunteer work it's a lot easier to phone up people I don't know and talk to them." Beth talked about "how intimidating the work would have been for one person" but not for the group which also helped them build the individual "confidence needed to present" their findings.

Their ability to shape the unfolding inquiry and their relationship to the teachers upon whose expertise they could draw were particularly critical to the experience: "We were left in charge," Peter said, "We planned our own thing, and it was different [in that] we organized our data into three categories: teachers, academics, and extra-curricular activities, while other schools chose different categories." He spoke of the teacher's role as one of "tracking our progress" and asking "what we were thinking of doing next." His team worked with three other teachers in the school when they were needed, which, he said, "made us feel more important."

Bernardo said that the teachers. . .

> let us do our work. We pretty much learned by ourselves. I like this better -- it's not so much standing over our shoulders and watching us. We asked when we needed to know how to do something. They treated us more like adults.

Learning in teams with a good deal of responsibility for shaping the inquiry and the reporting of outcomes contributed to the high level of engagement, as did the apparently unique relationship students had with their adult supports, a point made also by one of their teachers:

> I believe that the students felt good about the project because they were working with professionals. Their work was respected and they were part of a team of people who were not only their peers. I think this gave them confidence and added to their self-esteem. As the project progressed, they made most of the decisions themselves, and they took risks. I think the experience was invaluable for them.

Her contribution as a teacher was characterized this way:

> I was there to act as a guide. What will an audience expect? What are the forms that make information accessible? What are the things that give your findings validity? I saw myself as a source of information. I gave feedback. I helped with formats, forms, and with information about their audience. Sometimes I pushed. I made it clear that I had high standards and they would meet them. I never assumed that the students couldn't or wouldn't.

Another teacher commented:

> [Students] are so used to discussions being teacher-led and not being asked for their opinions. It's a shame that more of our students can't have more opportunities to be creative thinkers and take more responsibility for their educational decisions.

Developing Their Collective Voice

In two respects the nature of the inquiry itself contributed to the increasing level of engagement as the project evolved through the semester. Students were talking to former students about *their* school. They began to compare their findings with their own views as they too were about to leave for the world of work or post-secondary school.

They were fascinated with the common response that graduates regretted "not working harder" while in high school; they argued about the finding that caring teachers were valued above those with the most knowledge of their subjects; they wondered why some students never got involved in extra-curricular activities and looked for correlations to their overall assessment of and success with school.

When preparing for the fourth time to give their presentation, this time to their class, one team decided for comparison purposes to survey Grade 12 students and to make a video capturing students' views of the school and presented both along with the

research findings. Increasingly they seemed to become part of -- while taking responsibility for -- the history of a community. Navdeep reported that it was interesting to find out "what graduates felt about our school, what we might be thinking a few years from now." Peter summed it up:

> I don't think I would have felt the same way graduating from this high school as I do now having done this project. Because of the conversations I had during the interviews, hearing their memories and experiences, I related to all of them. I realized I was not the only one to feel this way or that way. It changed the way I felt about [my school] and while others could hardly wait to leave, I now felt kind of sorry to go.

Over and over, students referred to this as "real" or useful" research. It strengthened their sense of identity and the importance of their own and other students' voices.

Becoming Part of the Community Dialogue

What convinced them of this most was the response of their various audiences. At first they were not sure anyone would be interested, but after presenting their findings to teachers and parents at the division's high school conference, students were overwhelmed: "People really cared what we had to say!", "They were really interested!", "All that work really paid off!" They presented their findings to the Board of Trustees, and then again at their school staff meetings. "I felt happy they actually wanted to know this information; they seemed really interested in changing the school, in making it better," Bernardo commented. Navdeep said:

> I felt kind of special because we are doing a project for the whole division and that this project might really make a difference, that schools might make some changes because of it. It had a direct impact. It applied to all of us.

This is the voice of a student who feels she has entered the conversation. Students in this project not only learned how to take into account planning for a variety of audiences; they also experienced success in communicating important information and communicating it well. Clearly they felt they had something of importance to contribute to the community's dialogue about education in Seven Oaks.

Implications for Schools

It has been a goal of our district to develop student "voice," and our ability to hear that voice, in our dialogue about education. Audiences at the high school conference, at school staff meetings and the Board meeting were deeply impressed by the information and mode of the presentation by these student researchers. Perhaps findings gathered by young people talking to other young people is particularly convincing, or perhaps the "voice" of students contains a veracity we adults with all our vested interests do not have, or perhaps student engagement appeals to our sense of what education should be about. Whatever the reasons, we are convinced that these results had a hearing most research in this context would not have had.

The students had helped to shape the study from its inception, conveying an ownership which was reflected in these presentations. This was, after all, an authentic research project with a real audience and purpose, a kind of ideal model for curricular activity worthy of Grade 12 students. The dialogue that occurred amongst the students from three high schools, the interaction and teamwork of the teachers and support persons to the project, the conversations between the students and the former students and between the students and their audiences, was rich and rewarding and suggests another model for how we think teaching and learning might ideally take place in our schools. If we take seriously the notion of an "information" society, high school students must be challenged to engage in inquiry of their own shaping. They need to develop the skills to work in teams, to construct their own understandings -- with help at hand when they need it -- and to learn the sophisticated skills of communicating them to a variety of audiences. To do this, they must be encouraged to address the kind of real-world issues with which all of us in a democratic society must be concerned.

Furthermore, senior level students developing instruments and collecting and analyzing data provides, we believe, a model for other districts who wish to combine purposes of low-cost data collection with the improvement of district-wide communication while providing educational experiences for students. But ultimately the latter is what stands out for us. As one of the teachers put it:

> Although the results were important and should be used to improve our high schools, what was more important to me was to see these students work hard, learn skills that will clearly be of benefit to them, and to see what a student does can be not only of value but *exciting*.

Clearly, the students thought so. "I liked the feeling that you're part of something important," Peter said. Marvin concluded, "It was a lot of fun . . . a whole lot of fun."